

### **Matthew 12:46-50**

While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, 'Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.' But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'

### **“Vowed To Make Her Proud”**

(Odd Figures in History – Anna Jarvis)

Rev. Charles Schuster

May 9, 2010

I want to say something about the students in our choir. I believe that for many of them, this is their last Sunday, perhaps until next year, and what a gift they have given us during the year. For those who are here, for those who are studying for tests, like probably all of them should have been, we are in your debt. Thank you very much.

Harold Kushner in his book, it's the one we're studying Wednesdays at noon, it's entitled *Conquering Fear: Living Boldly in an Uncertain World*, Harold Kushner tells about being on a flight from Atlanta to New York. He was late getting his reservation, so consequently as often is the case, he was sitting in the very back of the plane, the last seat, right by the rest room. Ever been there? It's not fun. Sitting next to him was a well-dressed couple. He visited with them some. They said they were on the way to New York to attend a fund-raising dinner at the Waldorf Astoria. Now, just an aside. My grandmother, when my cousins and I would get together at dinner, like Mothers Day, we'd all be there, and if we kept our elbows off the table and didn't use what she called the banjo grip with our fork, and were relatively polite, would say, "You boys are so good, I could take you to the Waldorf Astoria." Never been there, but it must be a very special place in New York. Well, they were on their way there for a fund-raising dinner, the Waldorf Astoria, where the guest of honor would be the King and Queen from Thailand. And Kushner commented that he expected that most people, on the way to dine with royalty, would be seated in first class, not back there where he was, the last seat on the plane. And he said to Rabbi Kushner, "My wife is more comfortable in the last row. She's read about lots of planes that have crashed, but has never read of a plane being rear-ended."

So this morning on Mothers Day, we don't need to sit in the back of the church, although we will spend some time looking back, we are in no danger of being rear-ended. We are in no danger of being rear-ended because we will look back but we will also move ahead, and as your pilot, preacher, I'll work hard to see we don't crash.

Mothers Day, let's look back a bit. For some of us it's a look at what is now, not what was. What did she or what does she do for us? What has she done? What do we think of when we think of Mothers Day? What comes to mind? First of all, I think for many of us it's a place. She tried, and for many of us, successfully gave us a place. Last Sunday the

youth led us in worship, and it was clear, sitting and listening and participating in worship, that they have a place in the church. This is their place, they're comfortable here, and that's a tribute to a lot of things, including the Youth Pastor and the sponsors who have worked with them, and the parents who have supported them. But I wonder how Jesus felt on Youth Sunday when he took the pulpit for the first time at First Church, Nazareth? It was his place, it was his home, it was his synagogue, it was his house of worship, and they let him give the sermon. And at one point in the sermon, somebody in the synagogue was heard to say, "Why, that's Joseph's boy." And I think someone else would have said, "That's Mary's son." Mothers Day reminds us of our place, that she gave us a place. Oprah Winfrey thought about her place and said, "Home is where you know people care about what you're doing." And then she went on to say, "Home is where people care about what you're doing when the doings aren't so good."

Garrison Keillor has written a lot about his place in his book *The Woebegon Boy*. He says, "I was named after a great-grandfather who moved from the cold weather in Norway to escape the winter and ended up in Minnesota." "Lake Woebegon is a rough town where all in one block and for less than five dollars you can get a tattoo, a glass of gin, a social disease, and enough left over to get into a poker game." But then he goes on to say, "The Lutherans have civilized that. It's a good place to grow up," he said. "Your parents sent you off to school with lunch money and told you to be polite and do what the teacher said, and if there was a problem at school there's absolutely no doubt it was your fault. And your parents were large and slow of foot, and they did not read books about parenting, and they did not weave their lives around yours, they had their own lives, which to you was a mystery."

My place, the place I grew up, was West Virginia. My mother gave us that place, my sister and me. West Virginia people are different. I think people everywhere are kind of odd, but in West Virginia they don't like outsiders. If they think you're not from there, they will try to shock you and watch your reaction. We were in my home state about two weeks ago, visiting my sister and family, and she thought it would be fun to go to a church potluck dinner. What was she thinking? Oddly enough, the dinner was breakfast. It was six o'clock in the evening, and we're sitting there eating scrambled eggs and raspberry muffins and sitting at a table in a Methodist church, and my sister told the people there we were from Colorado, so the people at our table did what people in that state always do. The woman who made the raspberry muffins announced that she had personally picked those raspberries from a field near her home, and then she had to come home and pick the ticks off her dog who went along with her. And the table got very quiet, and all eyes were on us. We were from out of state. What do we know about dogs and ticks? And it was very quiet. And I said into the silence, to no one in particular, "Did you ever see a tick swell up with blood?" It got even more silent. Their eyes got real big. And I said, "Yeah. You know one day, my cousin and me, we were in the mountains and we were bored and our dog was full of ticks and some of them ticks as big as boils, they all swelled up, and my cousin and I we picked the ticks off and we start telling stories around the campfire, and then we throw them swelled-up ticks into the fire and listen to them pop." People began picking up their dishes, and the pot-luck dinner was over, in my place.

Everybody ought to have a place. Why? The actor Kirk Douglas, in one of his books, he writes about the day that he was in California driving and there was a hitchhiker, a sailor. He picked him up. After he jumped into the car and threw his backpack into the back seat, the sailor took a double-take and a triple-take. Kirk Douglas, the actor. Blurted out to Douglas, "Hey, man, do you know who you are?" Our mother, I think more than our father, gave us a place so we'd know who we are.

Arnold Dallimore wrote a book about Susanna Wesley, mother of John and Charles, founders of our denomination. The book is a chronicle of the suffering that this family had to go through. All the children they had, thirteen, I think, and a bunch of them died as children, some of them at birth. And Samuel Wesley, the father, was either a great preacher or an awful one, because they tried to burn down the parsonage, he made people so mad. Now, that's preaching. But anyway... And they didn't pay him very much, and he couldn't pay his bills, and so they threw him in prison. Some of the letters from Samuel Wesley to the family came from prison, and Susanna is described by someone who actually knew her as a woman of extraordinary power of mind, and she came from a family that gave her a place, and she gave her family a place, clearly. She gave her children a place.

We have a place given to us, at a home long ago, or maybe it's the house where we live. A place at the table. A place in the family. A place where we can answer the question, "Do you know who you are?" And looking back, there is a place. It's a home where people know us, where they knew us when. And our mother saw to it we had a place, and that's important.

Secondly, when we think of Mothers Day we think of the person. She was somebody to us. Two little boys build a treehouse. They imagine themselves in spaceships. Star Wars, if you heard the children's sermon last week. They were playing Star Wars, space station, they were up in the tree and suddenly their mother stood beneath the tree, called up to them, "You boys come home. You come home right now, it's time for dinner." One little boy turned to the other and said, "Uh-oh, I believe I hear Earth calling." Even for Jesus, he heard Earth calling, and Mary was the one who got to him. He listened to God of course but he also listened to Mary. She was the person who became a motivating factor in his life. If he heard the voice of God which he did from above, he also heard Earth calling, from his mother. She never let him forget that there was a larger destiny for him. Never lost the vision that there was a world out there to be saved, and his job was to do something about that, and Mothers Day is the same. The mother of Mothers Day, Anna Reeves Jarvis, Anna Jarvis, her daughter, the time of the Civil War, Anna Reeves Jarvis. The state of West Virginia is divided, brother against brother. Families divided, it's awful. And it was best to be neutral. And the mother of Mothers Day, remembering her mother, Anna Reeves Jarvis, remembered how her mother cared for the sick and the wounded on both sides, Union or Confederate, North or South, didn't matter. And how she founded a Mothers Day work club in her town, and then other work clubs around the state, to help improve the health conditions. To boil your water. To pasteurize your milk. To sterilize your kitchen utensils and quarantine contagious diseases, those who had them. And when

Thornberry Brady Brown, a Union soldier, the first casualty of the Civil War, the mother of Mothers Day's mother stepped forward and offered a prayer in the church, at a time when that was a dangerous thing to do. But she did it. So the mother of Mothers Day remembered how her mother taught Sunday School for twenty years in that Methodist church. Andrews Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia. And so she pushed to have a day to honor her mother and all mothers, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of May, Woodrow Wilson approved it, they celebrate mothers. Suggesting that a mother's love could heal the divisions in the nation, a mother's love could put our lives on a higher destiny. A person, her mother, who she was, the up-againstness that she gave. Annoying sometime, yes, drove us crazy. That drives us higher. Drove us to obey, that drives us to be better. Gave us a hard time in preparation for the hard times. She was a comfort when we were sad, a friend when we were happy. She was with us when we cried, and she laughed with us until we could learn to laugh at ourselves.

Laura Welsh has written a book, *Spoken from the Heart*. She tells about her mother Jenna, tells about how her mother loved books and how she would read to her. Maybe that's why Laura became a librarian. Often the two of them would go outside at night. She writes this about her mother. "So complete was the darkness that all we saw were the stars and the inky blackness, and above us the constellations hanging like strands of Christmas lights wanting to be plucked, and I would reach up with my little girl arms, trying to touch the glowing orbs. Lying beside me on a blanket, my mother would point out Orion and the Little Dipper and Cassiopeia and the planets, the glorious pink of Venus or the bright fire red of Jupiter, and her mother had done the same for her, and she would say, "Laura, look at the sky, because it won't look that way until a year again. It won't look that way for a year. Look up," she'd say, "Laura, Laura, look up." Laura and Jenna, two best friends. You know who Laura Welsh Bush is. No matter what your politics, Laura Welsh Bush, Midland Texas, and her mother, two best friends, "Look, Laura, Laura, look up." Little Laura Bush, they called her in Texas, grew up with such a positive attitude. She has it. Learned it from her mother, who taught her to look up, to be hopeful.

Today we remember our mother, the person, the personality, the character, the example she was. We remember that. She gave it to us. She gave us a place. What did we give her? We give her a promise, a promise to make her proud. Jesus made his mother proud. It may not look like it, but he did. I'm convinced he did. When did he make his mother proud? Was it the time that, when he was twelve and he was debating with the theologians, the clergy in the temple, when he was lost in the crowd, was that it? Or could it have been the day on the Mount, when he gave the sermon and came up with the Beatitudes? Perhaps. Maybe that was it. There are other times. Maybe it was the sermon he gave. We didn't read the whole part of that, it didn't end well, but not all sermons do. I really think the time he made his mother proud was when she came to the place where he was speaking and she heard him. She was standing outside listening, and someone said to him, "Your mother's outside." Someone interrupted him and said, "Your mother and your brother, they're here." And he said those words, "Who is my mother?" He came to a point in his life, I think, and it made his mother proud. He loved her, there's no question about that. But he came to know that he belonged to the world. And at that point he had come

of age. It was the fulfillment of the destiny Mary hoped he would fulfill. And then she watched him take off with his life to the point where he fulfilled her expectations, but there were greater expectations she never thought of, as it is the case with mothers, our mothers. Our mother gave us birth. She is proud of us. When she sees us grow to become the person, ourselves, who belongs to the world. "Our children are not our children. They are life's longing for itself," Kahlil Gibran said. Erich Fromm knew it. He said, "Our main task is to give birth to ourselves." Of course we resist, try to find our way into the future by running back toward the past, or try to move forward by just sitting down or standing still. Of course we do. We hear the earth speaking, or the word of God. You know whatever, something pulling us, and we hang up when it's a call, you know, or text message or rebuttal or forward the email. It's someone else, not us.

I'm reminded of the contrary old man whose health problems brought diminishment and an attitude to his life, and he said to his pastor, "I don't know why God doesn't just take me home." And the pastor tried a technique that we learned in seminary, called compassionate confrontation, and said, "God must still have something for you to do here." The old man responded with a reverse technique that we've learned, called congregant obstinance. Some of you know that methodology. And he said, "Maybe God still has something for me to do, but I want to tell you something, Pastor, I'm not gonna do it." The best way to honor our mother is not with a flower or gift, but with a promise. A promise to fulfill our destiny, a promise to come of age and some of us are obstinate about it.

There has been shocking news around the church, and we are in grief this week. The death of David and Liz Schump in a plane crash, the death of Trudy Driver. Sudden, tragic. Trudy was known as Pootsnager. She was a clown. She sung in our choir. She was a clown, dressed up like a clown. If you ever were with her when she evolved into the clown, she would put on the makeup. She would all of a sudden become something that she hadn't been. Evolving into the clown, the persona of Pootsnager. And she would say to you in her voice, I can hear it in my mind, "Hey, dudes and dudettes." She made us laugh. I never asked her, I should have, I learned this week that someone she had talked to, how do you do that? Her mother back in Minnesota I think was in a nursing home, and Trudy couldn't go back and see her as often as she wished she could. So to honor her mother, she dressed up as a clown and went to nursing homes and visited those people whose sons and daughters couldn't see them as often as they would like. She paid it forward. She fulfilled her destiny and she made her mother proud.

Last Sunday the youth took over our service. Alec talked about the high school graduation and college and the future, and how he had come to be at peace with it, you may recall. "I have found faith," he said. "Whatever way the pieces of my life fall, I let go of my fear. I just let go. I trust, I give myself over to the things around me." Tess talked about how her father and mother faced her father's illness with courage. "My mother has courage in everything. Everything she does." She loves her mother, and as to her father, she said "Lance Armstrong is a biker like my dad." She said, "He's great, he's broken and set lots of records, he has faced and overcome his illness, which was cancer as well. Lance Armstrong is great, but he can't hold a candle to my dad because my dad conquers

when there seems to be no strength." And then Robin almost died. Liver transplant within the past couple of months. Speaking about her faith, telling good can come out of every situation no matter how tragic. She can say that. Sometimes feeling God's presence, sometimes "Where is God?" Surrounded by people who love her, and are supportive of her. Saying true miracles, you know, you see them every day. Those young people who spoke, and the others who led us in worship. The singers, the musicians, the people who read and led us in the liturgies and took up the offering and ushered, if you looked and if you knew where to look, you could see their parents. They made their parents proud, because in a way they took a step. They came of age, they moved forward. A promise to make to our mother, to make our mother proud. Maybe we do it when we're young, or maybe we grow and mature and it happens, or maybe we've yet to do it and we're old. But the promise we make to her, to make her proud, isn't so complex. We don't have to do great things to be recognized by the world.

Let me close with a true story. Bobby Rowan, Georgia legislator, rose in his seat one day at the state assembly. "Mr. President," he said, "This is 1960. I move that the Georgia election code be amended as follows: that no person may vote either in the Democratic Primary or the general election in the state of Georgia, who has been dead more than three years. On this Mothers Day, May 9, 2010, the most important promise we can give our mother is this, that we promise to live fully our lives until the day we die. She who gave us life would be most proud to know we used the gift well, from the beginning to the end, with gratitude, with grit and with the grace of God. The best way to make the person who gave us life proud is to use the gift she gave us, and to use it well.